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ABSTRACT

The Village College is a uniquely English institution, yet it may be a viable model for rural education in some parts of the United States as well. If so, four adaptations seem paramount: attitudinal restructuring, institutionalization of adult and community education, a demography capable of supporting the effort, and a new model of educational leadership. Of the four, attitudinal restructuring appears to be the most basic. Life long learning tends to be honored more in the breach than in the main. First, education is typically associated in the public mind with corporate schooling, and corporate schooling is defined as a certified teacher teaching a standardized curriculum topic to a registered student in an accredited school. Nonformal education embodied in adult and community education violates the schooling rule in every respect and thus forfeits substantive social support. Second, there is widespread agreement that society's responsibility for education has been fulfilled when youth leave school to join adult society. Third, postsecondary education typically has been accorded "privilege" rather than "right" status. Fourth, no compelling state of interest has ever been articulated on behalf of adult and community education, and thus it has not been incorporated into the national educational plan. (JHZ)

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The English Village College: A Rural Education Alternative

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The English Village College: A Rural Education Alternative

Historically, providing equality of educational opportunity for the child, youth and adult populations of sparsely populated rural areas has been problematic. Public concern over "the plight of rural education" (Tamblyn, 1975) has vacillated between benign neglect and radical reform. In the latter case, rural schools typically have been subjected to the imposition of an urban reform model characterized by consolidation, centralization and standardization (Rosenfeld and Sher, 1977) in a well-meaning but condescending attempt to improve the efficiency and quality of schooling (Edington, 1980) for "disadvantaged" rural youth (Turney, et al., 1980). Thoughtful critics of such reform attempts have pointed out that the benefits achieved were bought at considerable price -- a weakening of school-community ties, a subordination of agrarian values to business-industrial values, and the generation of social conflict or, in Dunne's (1981) words, "a quiet war".

The history of public concern for the educational opportunities of rural adults has followed much the same pattern as that for children and youth. Until recently, benign neglect has been the norm. Consequently, as Cross, (1981) has observed:

> Rural [adult] Americans are among the most educationally disadvantaged of all population

> sub-groups, participating in organized instruction at about half the rate of the average American. Worse yet, because many people living in remote areas are older and have lower levels of formal schooling, the handicaps to further education pile up and there is very little chance that older people with low levels of educational attainment will be participating in the learning society without the intervention of educators who provide "low threat" learning opportunities (p.17).

Since the turn of the century numerous attempts have been made to provide "low threat" learning opportunities. Three are prominent among them: (1)the introduction of county libraries circa 1890 and subsequent major expansions of that effort; (2)the Cooperative Extension Service established under the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 and currently operative in 3150 counties and territories; and (3)the incorporation of community service components in the community colleges circa 1950. More recently, the Rural Free University model has been proposed (Killacky, 1981). All of these efforts have been organized in response to the perceived cultural, educational and social needs of adults in rural areas.

One of the striking features of the foregoing descriptions is that efforts to upgrade the quality of educational opportunities for rural adult and child/youth populations have been undertaken largely inde-

pendently of each other. One might argue that such uncoordinated action has weakened the position of both advocacy groups. However, that liability need not persist. The English Village College provides an alternative model for rural education, and one which accommodates the social, educational and recreational needs of the entire population simultaneously.

The English Village College is an enduring monument to Henry Morris, Chief Education Officer (county superintendent) of Cambridgeshire from 1922-1954. Cambridgeshire is an essentially rural, agrarian county some 50 miles north of London. The county (shire) is dotted with a myriad of small towns and villages tied together with a web of roads of varying quality. Its major metropolitan center, Cambridge, houses a major university, a regional market, county administrative offices, and a variety of local industries. Cambridge's economic, educational and political dominance in the county persuaded Morris that the surrounding villages were in danger of becoming "denuded of life" and becoming "simply a dormitory [to and from] which transport would whisk the inhabitants to spend their waking lives in the city" (Brackenburg, 1968, p.7).

As envisioned by Morris, the Village College was to be the social, educational and recreational center of its attendance area. Its aims, as recently re-articulated by a group of chief Village College administrators include:

1. To provide facilities through which people learn throughout their lives.
2. To enable individuals to develop their talents and understanding of themselves and their community so that they can manage their lives more effectively.
3. To enable people to contribute to the corporate well-being of the community.

(Wardens and Principals Submission, 1985, p.1)

In order for the Village Colleges to achieve such lofty aims five necessary conditions had to be met. First, the governance structure including its charter had to be flexible enough to respond to total local constituency demands. Second, a management and staff structure responsive to child/youth/adult demands was required. Third, it required a curriculum philosophically dedicated to life long learning and organizationally derived from the principle of self-managed learning. Fourth, it required a stable funding base, and fifth a community support structure. How these aims and imperatives for enactment were realized can be appreciated in part from a brief description of Sawtry Village College.

The multiple, single storey red brick buildings which constitute the physical facilities of Sawtry Village College sit campus-like on a manicured plot of ground on the outskirts of the village. Within these facilities its broad charter has enabled its locally elected "governors" to operate a comprehensive secondary school

(roughly grades 7-10), make provision for a 17,000 volume branch of the county library, make available a swimming pool and sports fields for school(s) and community use, operate a Youth Centre, offer a wide range of adult and community education courses (n=69 in the fall of 1985), house the monthly Child Health Clinic and the Sawtry and District Care and Resource Organization (a provider of a wide variety of social services), provide monthly community lunches, host Parish Council and other organizational meetings, and provide auditorium and kitchen facilities for a wide array of private and public purposes. More particularly, formal schooling is provided secondary school pupils through the conventional English secondary school curriculum. The College's working relation with the Village Infant and Junior schools is warm but informal. However, Infant and Junior school students are regularly scheduled users of the College facilities, notably its library and swimming pool.

The adult and community function of the College is administered by the College's Senior Community Education Tutor. Courses are regularly scheduled from 9:00 am to 10:00 pm Monday through Friday and on Saturdays. Courses sample the full range of academic, recreational and cultural offerings as demand warrants, e.g., Spanish for Beginners and Advanced Computing (academic), Swimming for the Over 50's and Gymnastics for Children (recreational), and Calligraphy and Lacemaking (cultural). All courses are taught by community volunteers, and a moderate fee

structure ($7.50 - $22.50) regularly results in over-subscription. In sum, the College attempts to meet as responsibly as it can the major academic, social and recreational needs of the greater Sawtry community precisely as envisioned by Morris.

Killacky (1984) has identified four major criteria for assessing responsive adult and community rural education programs: active user engagement, pluralism, affirmation of rural values and culture, and stable institutional bases with access to learning resources. Sawtry Village College rates well on these four. Active user engagement is demonstrated in the wide variety of client generated, client taught, over-subscribed course offerings and the unrelenting demand on facilities and fiscal and human resources. Pluralism is evidenced in the heterogeneity of the learner population of which age is one aspect. It would not be at all unusual to find three generations of one family engaged in learning on the College campus on any one day and time. Clearly, this is an ever-present testimonial to the belief in life long learning. Affirmation of rural values and culture is reflected in course offerings and the utilization of local learning resources. Finally, the acquisition of stable institutional bases with access to learning resource tools has been accomplished in dual fashion. Formally, the adult and community education component of the College's total mission has been institutionalized fiscally through inclusion in the College's operating budget. Informally, the College has

developed a strong community support structure. Prominent within that structure is the Sawtry Village College-Community Association, a loose confederation of some fifty member groups notable for their diversity, e.g., The Alconbury Football Club, The Cambridgeshire Fire Service, The Sawtry and District Archaeological Society, and The Sawtry Preschool Players. The Association representing some 3000 plus members takes as one of its major goals the funding of capital improvements at the College through a variety of social and cultural events.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the Village College is a uniquely English institution developed to meet a particular set of cultural circumstances. Yet it may be a viable model for rural education in some portions of the U. S. as well. If so, it is legitimate to inquire into the adaptations necessary. Four seem paramount -- attitudinal restructuring, institutionalization of adult and community education, a demography capable of supporting the effort, and a new model of educational leadership. Of the four, attitudinal restructuring appears to be the most basic. Life long learning tends to be honored more in the breach than in the main. Four interrelated factors seems to account for this. First, education is typically associated in the public mind with corporate schooling (formal education), and corporate schooling is defined by "the schooling rule", i.e., "Education is a certified teacher teaching a standardized curriculum topic to a registered student in an accredited school"

(Meyer and Rowan, 1978 p. 94). Non-formal education embodied in adult and community education violates the schooling rule in every respect and thus forfeits substantive social support. Second, there is fairly widespread agreement that formal schooling constitutes society's primary mechanism for socializing youth into adult society. Once that has been achieved at whatever level of schooling -- official "leaving age" through post-graduate study -- society's responsibility for education has effectively been fulfilled. Again, the philosophy of life long learning is clearly inconsistent with this stance. Third, in general, post-secondary education (most of one's life!) typically has been accorded "privilege" rather than "right" status in the educational philosophy of the states and has been supported accordingly. Fourth, for reasons too numerous to elaborate here, no "compelling state interest" has ever been articulated on behalf of adult and community education and thus it has not been incorporated into the national educational psyche.

Until attitudinal restructuring occurs it is unlikely that the English Village College concept can or will be institutionalized. At the most basic, institutionalization refers to official recognition, fiscal support and, in brief, incorporation into what Meyer and Rowan (1978) refer to as the "ritual classification system" of education. This was achieved in Cambridgeshire. In the U. S. it would clearly require amending existing legislation governing funding formulas, facilities construction,

utilization, insurance coverage, and the like.

Third there is the matter of demographics. Simply put this means that the population served must be sufficiently dense to support the undertaking, and that the requisite infrastructure (communication and transportation systems) are in place. Both conditions were present in Cambridgeshire; they may not be in all rural areas of the U. S.

Finally, adoption/adaptation of the English Village College model would equally require a new model of educational leadership. Currently, the National Commission on Educational Administration, a University Council for Educational Administration sponsored body, is considering a proposal which, if adopted, would substantially enlarge the office of school superintendent. In brief, he/she would become the community's superintendent of education, coordinating the efforts of all community education providers, e.g., schools, churches, social agencies, youth organizations, etc., in order to improve education for children and youth. Where the proposal falls short of the English Village College model is in restricting the scope of the superintendent's responsibility to the education of children and youth. No provision is made in the proposal for adult or community education, an omission conceptually inconsistent with the principle of life long learning.

Suppose it were otherwise, and that the "superintendent of education" was responsible for coordinating

and maximizing educational opportunities for life long learners. What difference would it make in the training of superintendents? Space, time and the criterion of appropriateness do not permit an exhaustive discussion of that issue here, but three principles can be enunciated. First, as I have argued elsewhere (Pohland, 1986), the context of practice must be taken into account in the design and implementation of preparation programs. In the present context that implies study of the sociology, economics and culture of rural societies. Second, the philosophy of community education and the principles and practices of adult education would have to receive attention equivalent to that associated with currently emphasized theories of schooling. Third, while retaining emphasis upon mastering the technical competencies currently associated with the superintendency, greater attention to the political role of the superintendent would be required as the Commission recommends.

In brief recapitulation, it has been proposed that the English Village College provides a viable model for rural education reform. At a minimum, the model has the potential to actualize the ideal of life long learning; to provide high quality educational opportunities for children, youth and adults alike; to achieve economies of scale through consolidation at appropriate levels of schooling; to release the latent human potential for teaching and learning and thus revitalize rural communities; to reduce the gap between the educationally ad-

vantaged and disadvantaged; and to sustain cherished values. Such potential ought not be ignored.

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